

Remarks at a meeting of the Ottawa Branch of the

Royal Commonwealth Society

“Effective Paths to Development in Africa”

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Maureen O’Neil

President, International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure to be with you, and an honour to be a guest of the Royal Commonwealth Society.

I am especially pleased to take part in your conversation this evening because you are addressing one of the most urgent and compelling of global priorities—the acceleration of African development. None of us can ignore the moral, political or economic importance of Africa’s future. It will inevitably touch us all.

But the first proposition I would offer here is that the speed and direction of African development will be decided mostly by Africans themselves—not by us, not by any outsiders, whatever our interests or intentions. For better or worse, Africans will make Africa’s future.

My second proposition follows from the first. To the extent that sustainable development is occurring in Africa, it is being achieved for the most part in the powerful interaction between African knowledge and African governance. Africa’s future will be determined in the complex dynamics of African research and African policy reform, African innovation and the progress of African democracy.

And that leads me to my third proposition. As outsiders, our best and most productive contribution to Africa’s future will be to foster the creativity, zeal and tenacity of Africans themselves to learn, innovate and improve their own futures.

To put it simply: Knowledge empowers people. New knowledge liberates people with new choices, and new prospects. Knowledge endows parliaments and governments with the capacity for informed deliberation and decision. And knowledge strengthens families and communities with the information to hold their parliaments and governments accountable.

I stress the decisive power of knowledge not least because it has always defined the work of my own organization, the International Development Research Centre. IDRC was established by Parliament in 1970—some 37 years ago—with a remarkably far-sighted mandate. That mission is to promote research in developing countries, research by the people of those countries, for the

purpose of applying knowledge (in the words of the IDRC Act) “to the economic and social advancement of those regions.”

And indeed, IDRC has been investing in African development research from its earliest days. Today, roughly a third of all IDRC program funding goes to supporting research and capacity-building in Africa. The focus of our support, with increasing intensity, is to encourage research that engages directly and effectively in the making of better government policy—and in the procedures of better governance.

But good policy and good governance mean little as mere abstractions. Let me illustrate IDRC’s experience with some concrete examples of practical research—by Africans—for development policy and action.

My first case comes from Tanzania, in a dramatic demonstration of research for policy in the field of public health. In Tanzania—as in many other countries in Africa—malaria counts among the most lethal threats to human survival. Yet (by the mid-1990s) malaria treatment and prevention were attracting only a tiny fraction of Tanzania’s total health-care budget—scarcely five per cent in some districts.

That mismatch between budgets and needs has since been corrected, in some measure, as a result of research by Tanzanian scholars and public health authorities supported by IDRC. The Tanzanian Essential Health Interventions Project, known as TEHIP, began with householder surveys—a systematic exploration of what people actually reported about their own health and health-care needs. But TEHIP also addressed governance—specifically by informing the decentralization of budget allocation decisions from the central government to district administrations.

Quite quickly, health spending was channelled to where it would do the most good, for the most people. As a direct consequence, child mortality has dropped more than 40 per cent in the first two pilot districts. Tanzanians are applying these lessons throughout the country. And others, including Nigerians, are adopting these evidence-based policy approaches to their own public-health requirements.

Again: Knowledge improves policy. But it can also open and inform the procedures of making policy—generating governance that is more transparent, responsive and effective.

You will not be surprised that much of IDRC’s support for health research in Africa is aimed at mitigating the catastrophe of HIV/AIDS. South Africa alone, with a population of 42 million, has more HIV-positive citizens than Europe, the United States and Canada put together. The social and economic burdens of HIV infections (not to speak of the human sorrows) are growing. Overall life expectancy in South Africa is falling.

So, how do we get desperately urgent—and very costly—drug treatment to the patients who need it most? How do we deliver care where medical expertise is scarce, where patient information is fragmented or non-existent, and where there is widespread public resistance to HIV/AIDS testing?

With promising results, research has been uncovering practical answers. One project combines patient surveys and data analysis with better training for nurse-practitioners in the field—the professionals mainly responsible for diagnosing and treating HIV/AIDS patients.

Like the TEHIP project in Tanzania, this South African project engages African researchers, practitioners and policymakers in a collaboration of discovery, policy and action. Relatively small contributions by outsiders, carefully targeted, help Africans devise and execute their own solutions to their own problems.

And speaking of problems, the phenomenon in developing countries of urban agriculture—growing food on roadsides, vacant lots, riverbanks, even rooftops—has for decades been treated as a problem by city authorities. These little urban farms have been associated with squatters, and generally either condemned or ignored by government officials. But in reality—as research is proving—urban agriculture is much less a problem than a solution.

After all, it is widely forecast that nearly all the population growth on the planet, for the next 25 years, will occur in the cities of developing countries. But 2030, about 60 per cent of the world's population will live in cities.

In Africa, and throughout the developing world, urban agriculture represents enormous potential as poor people grow food to feed their families, or to earn some extra income, or in many cases to create full-time employment. To measure that potential—and to inform constructive urban policy and land-use regulation—IDRC has been funding research on urban agriculture for more than 20 years. This is research with real results.

In Uganda, Kampala's city council has formally recognized urban agriculture in its strategic planning. In Ghana—to name another Commonwealth country—university researchers in three cities found that composting, combined with landscaping and other uses, could absorb as much as 20 per cent of urban organic waste. Research is changing attitudes about urban farming—and altering governance for the better.

Altering governance turns out to be a crucial remedy for still another impediment to African development—the so-called digital divide.

It is impossible to deny, and foolish to neglect, the close connections between innovation, development progress, and easy access to low-cost telephone and Internet services. Information and communication technologies—where they are affordable and physically accessible—immensely improve chances for poor people to escape the deprivations of chronic poverty.

ICTs—cell phones, laptops and the rest—hook up fishermen and farmers to city markets. They link new entrepreneurs to microcredit. They speed diagnostic advice to rural doctors. They save lives with calls for help when natural disasters strike remote communities. They introduce young students to a world of knowledge and possibility.

But in Africa, especially rural Africa, ICTs remain beyond the reach of millions. One reason is the tangle of legal and regulatory regimes that characterize Africa's 45 countries—many of them incompatible across borders and self-destructive inside those borders. Obsolete rules, licence fees and other kinds of misgovernment frustrate ICT investment. They block technical and commercial innovation. And they defeat the competition that can ultimately deliver both efficiency and equity in a thriving economy. In short, the injustices apparent in the digital divide are often produced more by policy more than by poverty.

A great deal of IDRC-supported research has therefore concentrated on finding the right combinations of technology and policy reform to democratize information and communication technologies. Results have already been significant. In countries as different as Uganda, Mozambique, Senegal and South Africa, research-based regulatory reforms have cut the costs of both using and investing in wireless telephone and Internet services. As a consequence, lives are improving. Poor neighbourhoods and rural villages are discovering new opportunities in affordable communications.

The proliferation of ICTs can have a wonderfully democratizing effect. But other industrial sectors, by contrast, seem to accentuate inequalities between rich and poor, and between developed and developing countries. One of these sectors is biopharmaceuticals—a business that demands huge capital investments over many years, rich educational capacity, sophisticated intellectual property regimes, and global distribution networks. Clearly, these are attributes that would ordinarily place Africans at a severe disadvantage.

Even so, research is starting to show how African economies can participate in the future of biopharma. I am thinking of one study that is comparing institutional structures and policies in Nigeria, Tanzania and Kenya, together with Malaysia and Vietnam. By looking at different countries, in very different regions—a good example of South-South cooperation—African and Asian experts are seeking new strategies for promoting biopharma innovation in their own countries.

I will conclude now where I began—with three rather simple observations about African development.

First, the course of development in Africa will necessarily be decided in the main by Africans, not by outsiders.

Second, sustainable development will be achieved in the dynamic interaction of new knowledge and good governance. This is knowledge that informs open and responsible government. And it is governance to encourage the research and learning that will free people to improve their own futures.

And third, one of the best contributions we outsiders can make to Africa is to support African scholars and scientists. Their energies and intelligence can inform development that is truly sustainable and democratic. We can help them.

Thank you.